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Young, Black, Male, and Stalked by Bias

By BRENT STAPLES

The door to the subway train slides open, revealing three tall, young black men, crowding the entrance, with hooded sweatshirts pulled up over downward-turned faces; boxer shorts billowing out of over-large, low-slung jeans; and sneakers with the laces untied.

Your response to the look — and to this trio on the subway — depends in part on the context, like the time of day, but especially on how you feel about young, male blackness.

If it unsettles you — as it does many people — you never get beyond the first impression. But those of us who are not reflexively uncomfortable with blackness can discern the clues that tell who these kids are. They may be tall, but their hormonally pockmarked faces, narrow hips and the cartoon-patterned underwear show that they are probably 15 years old, at most. The grimy black book bags, barely visible against the black hoodies, make them students on the way to school.

Young black men know that in far too many settings they will be seen not as individuals, but as the “other,” and given no benefit of the doubt. By the time they have grown into adult bodies — even though they are still children — they are well versed in the experience of being treated as criminals until proved otherwise by cops who stop and search them and eyed warily by nighttime pedestrians who cower on the sidewalks.

Society’s message to black boys — “we fear you and view you as dangerous” — is constantly reinforced. Boys who are seduced by this version of themselves end up on a fast track to prison and to the graveyard. But even those who keep their distance from this deadly idea are at risk of losing their lives to it. The death of Trayvon Martin vividly underscores that danger.

Very few Americans make a conscious decision to subscribe to racist views. But the toxic connotations that the culture has associated with blackness have been embedded in thought, language and social convention for hundreds of years. This makes it easy for people to see the world through a profoundly bigoted lens without being aware that they are doing so.

Over the last three decades, a growing body of research has shown that racial stereotypes play a powerful role in judgments made by ostensibly fair-minded people. Killers of whites, for example, are more likely to receive the death penalty than killers of blacks — and, according to the psychologist Jennifer Eberhardt, juries tend to see darker defendants as more "deathworthy" in capital cases involving white victims.

As Vesla Weaver, a political science professor at the University of Virginia, has written, "virtually every aspect of life and material well-being is influenced by skin color, in addition to race." Studies have shown, for example, that darker-skinned blacks are punished more severely than others for the same types of crimes; deemed less worthy of help during disasters like Hurricane Katrina; disfavored in some hiring decisions; and more likely to be unemployed.

THESE preconceptions are at work even in the early grades at school, where voluminous data show that children of color are far more likely than their white peers to be suspended, expelled or declared "disabled" and shunted into special education.

The power of stereotypes has always been easily illustrated in studies. But media accounts of the 911 calls made over the last several years by George Zimmerman, now charged with second-degree murder in the killing of Trayvon Martin, offer a glimpse of a man who seemed gripped by fears that he began to associate almost exclusively with black children and teenagers.

The 911 calls began at least eight years ago, with Mr. Zimmerman reporting on a range of non-emergencies, including the existence of potholes or someone driving slowly through the neighborhood. By late 2011, his calls were often about black youths and men, with complaints about suspicious activity or just loitering.

By the time he went on neighborhood watch patrol with his 9-millimeter pistol and spied Trayvon Martin, Mr. Zimmerman saw not a teenager with candy, but a collection of preconceptions: the black as burglar, the black as drug addict, the black "up to no good." And he was determined not to let this one get away.

As recently as a few years ago, this case probably would not have been noticed outside Florida, which has a long and bloody history of sacrificing black lives without consequence. The country is right to focus on this case and to look for ways to prevent it from happening again.

People who are seeking to affix blame for this tragic death do need to bear one thing in mind. Gun laws that allowed a community watch volunteer to run around armed are, of course, partly responsible. But Trayvon Martin was killed by a very old idea that will likely take generations and an enormous cultural transformation to dislodge.

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